



THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

OF THE UNIFYING CONVENTION OF THE

Veterans of Foreign Wars
of the United States

———— 1914–2014 ————





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Planning for this celebration began more than a year ago under the auspices of the University of Pittsburgh Military Veterans Initiative Group (MVGIG). Headed by Dr. Ron Poropatich, who directs the Center for Military Medicine Research (CMMR), the group has been meeting regularly to strategize the best way to celebrate this important milestone. It also seeks to maintain momentum going forward in supporting ongoing research efforts and outreach to veterans at the university and in the broader community.

Many different groups and individuals, both inside and outside of the university, have contributed. The officials of the local, state, and national VFW have been regular participants; both Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief John Biedrzycki and Past District 29 Commander Henry Manella have been regular meeting attendees and have provided crucial assistance. Other important support has been provided by the Ladies Auxiliary and the staff of the *VFW Magazine*. The archivists at the Heinz History Center and Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum guided students in conducting research related to the role of the university in both war and peacetime and the history of local VFW posts.

None of this would have happened without the steadfast encouragement of the University of Pittsburgh. Chancellor Emeritus Mark A. Nordenberg and Chancellor Patrick Gallagher have provided the logistical and financial assistance for the project. Vice Chancellor of External Relations and Chief of Staff G. Reynolds (Renny) Clark has been integrally involved throughout, marshalling resources of all kinds. The Office of the Chancellor provided support to conduct historical research at a number of different institutions throughout the region; several undergraduate history majors conducted that research. The archivists of the University Library System, especially those from Special Collections and the Archives Service Center, have been exceedingly helpful with textual collections and images. Lisa Schoon, working under the tutelage of Professor Peter Karsten of the history department, researched and wrote the brief history of the VFW in Pittsburgh enclosed herein.

People from a variety of other University departments and offices have contributed to this collaborative effort. These include (but are not limited to) representatives of the following: Center for Military Medicine Research, College of General Studies, Department of History, Department of Rehabilitation Science and Technology, Human Engineering Research Laboratories, Office of Government Relations, Office of Special Events, Office of University Communications, Office of Veterans Services, Pitt Vets (Student Veterans Association), Steel City Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps Unit, Three Rivers Battalion Army ROTC at the University of Pittsburgh, United States Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps Detachment 730. Representatives from the three ROTC units helped plan the event and the presence here today of the cadets and midshipmen symbolizes the respect and dignity it merits.

In particular, we wish to thank today's speakers. In addition to VFW Senior Vice Commander-In-Chief John Biedrzycki and Chancellor Patrick Gallagher, both Mr. Jack Wagner and Mr. Matthew Hannan serve as excellent examples of how to continue to provide service to veterans in our communities.

John Stoner, PhD

Department of History, University of Pittsburgh,
on behalf of the Military Veterans Initiative Group (MVGIG)

BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF SPEAKERS

John A. Biedrzycki Jr. is Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW). Mr. Biedrzycki served in the U. S. Army from 1967-1970. He served in Korea as a Pay Distribution Specialist with the 7th Infantry Division. His decorations include the National Defense Service Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and Korean Defense Medal.

Mr. Biedrzycki joined the VFW in 1969 at Post 418 in McKees Rocks, Pa. He has served in elected and appointed positions at the Post, County, District and Department (state) levels culminating with his election as Department Commander 2002-2003. On the national level, he has served on many committees, including as Chairman of the National VFW Programs Committee, Vice Chairman of the National Youth, Education and Community Service Committee and Vice Chairman of the National Legislative Committee. He is also a Life Member of the VFW National Home for Children and serves as a member of the Board of Directors, Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Museum in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Mr. Biedrzycki is a retired educator. He received his B.A. and Master's in Education from the University of Pittsburgh.

Patrick Gallagher, PhD, is the 18th Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer of the University of Pittsburgh. Prior to returning to Pitt (from which he received a Ph.D. in Physics), Chancellor Gallagher was Acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Commerce and the 14th Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), where he worked for more than twenty years. While at NIST, Chancellor Gallagher served in a variety of roles including research physicist and Director of the Center of Neutron Research.

In 2006, he received a Gold Medal from the U.S. Department of Commerce "for his leadership in inter-agency coordination efforts." He is a member of the American Physical Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Sigma Xi Honor Society, and the Sigma Pi Sigma Honor Society.

Matthew Hannan served in the United States Marine Corps from 1995 to 2010, reaching the rank of Gunnery Sergeant. While in the Marines, he participated in combat and humanitarian operations around the world and was

stationed with various operational forces, including Joint Special Operations Command, United States Forces in Korea, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, 2nd Marine Division, Marine Forces South, Joint Interagency Task Force South, and III Marine Expeditionary Force. Mr. Hannan received a separation from the Marine Corps as a result of an injury he sustained in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2007.

After leaving the Marines, Mr. Hannan participated in an internship offered through the Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation clinic with the Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL) in the ELeVATE Program (Experiential Learning for Veterans in Assistive Technology and Engineering) at Pitt. He is currently working on a degree in Rehabilitative Counseling.

He is a member of VFW Post 92, Disabled American Veterans, American Legion Post 868, and the Marine Corps League Post 827. He serves as a team leader for Semper Fi Odyssey and as a Veteran Advisor for the College of General Studies; he also volunteers with the Wounded Warrior Project and the Shadyside Boys & Girls Club of Western Pennsylvania. He is currently the president of Pitt Vets, which is the Student Veterans of America chapter at the University of Pittsburgh.

Jack Wagner is a veteran of the United States Marine Corps and a recipient of the Purple Heart and other military commendations for service in the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1968. After being discharged from the Marines, he attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and received a degree in Safety Management. He has served the city, county, and state as a member of Pittsburgh's City Council (1983-1993), President of Pittsburgh City Council (1989-1993), State Senator (1994-2004) and Chairman of the Democratic Caucus, and Auditor-General of Pennsylvania (2005-2009). He has also been a candidate for Mayor of Pittsburgh, Lieutenant-Governor, and Governor of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Wagner received IUP's Distinguished Alumni Award for service to the community and the university in 1994. Both while in public office and as a private citizen, he has worked to preserve services for veterans. While Auditor-General of Pennsylvania, he pushed (along with the VFW) to keep military stores in the state from closing. For 28 years, he has sponsored a golf fundraiser called Sharing and Caring to raise money to give disabled veterans an opportunity to take a riverboat cruise. He is a lifetime member of the VFW.

— A HISTORY OF THE —

Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW)

IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION

LISA SCHOON, MPIA



INTRODUCTION

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) is the oldest major organization of ex-servicemen and servicewomen still existing in the United States. The VFW remains an integral part of American society by engaging in several spheres of activity, including community service, advocating for veterans' rights and care, promoting "Americanism," and serving as a support organization for those who have served in foreign wars. It continues to remain a fixture within the lives of the Pittsburgh-area veterans, families, and others who benefit from the organization's efforts.

THE EARLY ROOTS OF THE VFW

While American veterans' organizations have existed since the Revolutionary War, it was not until after the Spanish-American War that the VFW, as it exists today, began to gain momentum. Prior to the Spanish-American War, veterans' organizations such as the Society of Cincinnati and the Grand Army of the Republic often limited membership to members from single conflicts (the American Revolution and the Civil War, respectively). The Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars produced a new cadre of veterans with a new array of problems; it became clear that new veterans' organizations were needed to successfully address these problems at the national level. Medical treatment, physical and emotional rehabilitation, and adequate financial

support for these veterans were desperately lacking. Many Spanish-American War veterans were "scarecrows, glassy-eyed, stabbed with pain by malaria, typhoid, and dysentery" and died at a rate of about 15 per day. Furthermore, veterans of both wars found it exceedingly difficult to gain employment. It was clear that the United States government was not able to provide for the physical, mental, and financial needs of returning able-bodied, sick, or wounded veterans of foreign war. This realization catalyzed the founding of the organizations that eventually united as the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

The VFW's earliest roots trace to September 29, 1899, when 13 men, all of whom had fought in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, gathered in a tailor shop on Main Street in Columbus, Ohio. Their mission was to remember their comrades who had been killed in action, to see what they could do for the living, and to share wartime memories. Several of the primary objectives of the contemporary VFW have endured from this early meeting in Columbus—namely, to remember those who have died in war, to engage in community service, and to support fellow veterans through camaraderie and advocacy.

These men agreed to a constitution for an organization called the American Veterans of Foreign Service (AVFS). This organization, along with the Denver, Colo.-based Army of the Philippines, served as direct predecessor organizations of the VFW. In contrast to the other veterans' organizations of that era, the AVFS would

be “evergreen,” meaning that all veterans of foreign wars (in other words, not just Spanish-American and Philippine-American War veterans) would be eligible and that all members would be treated as equals. It is to this founding of the AVFS in Columbus that the VFW generally traces its origins, as seen in the many 100th anniversary celebrations that occurred in 1999.

Membership in these and other veterans’ organizations spread slowly in the early 1900s, for these organizations were oftentimes in direct competition for enrollment or unaware of each other’s existence. For example, in 1901, a Pittsburgh-based group called the Philippine War Veterans organized, while an organization with the exact same name formed in Altoona, Pa., almost simultaneously. These two groups, along with a Philadelphia, Pa.-based group called the American Veterans of Philippine and China Wars, combined in 1903 to form a group that also named itself the American Veterans of Foreign Service (they were apparently unaware of the existence of the Columbus-based group). This confusion resulted in lower-than-desired enrollment for each and limited the extent to which either group could advocate for veterans.

The two AVFS groups combined in 1905. Forward-thinking leaders of these and other veterans’ organizations realized that a greater degree of cooperation and consolidation was still necessary; therefore, they called for “encampments” (i.e., conferences) to discuss the organizations’ futures. Though there was certainly some opposition from those who desired continued independence, the newly consolidated AVFS and the National Association of the Army of the Philippines combined in 1913 to form what was temporarily called the Army of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, a title that was meant to convey the broad, inclusive nature of the newly formed organization. In February 1914, attorney Rice W. Means, commander in chief of the AVFS, issued a call that asked for all veteran groups to amalgamate, stating, in part, “There must arise an organization which will embody the true patriotic sentiments of this nation. It must be so broad in its provisions for eligibility to include every man who has served or who in the future will serve in a war in which the U.S. is engaged.” Consequently, in 1914, a referendum to select a permanent name resulted in the choice of Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

THE 1914 PITTSBURGH ENCAMPMENT

It was not until the Pittsburgh encampment of September 14-17, 1914, that the official amalgamation of the organization and adoption of the VFW name occurred. The 1914 Pittsburgh encampment took place in what was then the Schenley Hotel in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh; it has since become the William Pitt Union of the University of Pittsburgh. The 1914 Pittsburgh encampment committee was headed by Major Robert G. Woodside, Dr. George Metzger, H.O. Kelley, and William Ralston, three of whom were former commanders of the AVFS. Two hundred fifty delegates from across the United States and its territories and possessions attended, including engineer Colonel George W. Goethals, builder of the Panama Canal, who represented the Panama Canal VFW post.

The following notable actions occurred at the Pittsburgh encampment:

- Official adoption of the name Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
- Acceptance of the Pittsburgh encampment pendant
- Adoption of the Cross of Malta as the official seal of the VFW
- Election of Colonel Thomas S. Crago of Waynesburg, Pa., veteran of the Philippine-American War, as the first national commander in chief of the VFW
- Adoption of the constitution of the VFW, which included the organization’s aims as stated in article 1: “The objects of this organization are fraternal, patriotic, historical and educational; to preserve and strengthen comradeship among its members; to assist worthy comrades; to perpetuate the memory and history of our dead, and to assist their widows and orphans; to maintain true allegiance to the government of the United States of America, and fidelity to its constitution and laws; to foster true patriotism; to maintain and extend institutions of American freedom; and to preserve and defend the United States from all her enemies, whomsoever.”

Not to be overshadowed by the unification of the VFW, the Ladies Auxiliary also officially came into being at the Pittsburgh encampment; Margaret Armstrong of Pittsburgh

was its first national president. While the auxiliary was initially very small, having only 47 members, it committed itself to becoming an inclusive, national force.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS: 1915–17

The VFW took root in Pittsburgh as a new, important organization almost immediately following the 1914 encampment. Four posts already existed in the Pittsburgh area, including three within Pittsburgh and one in McKeesport. These posts were named William McKinley, Sergeant Carney, Malate, and Ward.

After the Pittsburgh encampment of 1914, the Allegheny County Council of the VFW was founded, with Woodside as chair. Woodside, who remained active in veterans' affairs until his death in 1964, was integral both to the founding of the VFW and to its development throughout the first half of the 20th century. Woodside participated in four wars, first as a major in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War, then in World War I as a captain and major, and finally in World War II with the rank of brigadier general within the Pennsylvania National Guard. However, it was his actions during World War I that earned him the Distinguished Service Cross and Silver Star for his participation in six major battles in France. Woodside, who headed the American Veterans of Foreign Service for three years prior to the unification of the VFW, also served for a time as chair of the Allegheny County Council of the VFW before becoming the VFW's national commander in chief from 1920 to 1922. He served as Controller of Allegheny County from 1928 to 1948. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his 30 years of service as vice chair of the American Battle Monuments Commission. Woodside was a graduate of the law school of the University of Pittsburgh.

Present at the first VFW Allegheny County Council meeting for which there are minutes were representatives from the Malate #12, Carney #46, Siviter #87, McKinley #4, and New Kensington #92 posts; the number of persons attending these meetings and the scope of post representation eventually expanded and correlated with the growth of the organization in the Pittsburgh area. It is unsurprising that financial debates dominated many of

the early meetings, given that the leaders of the council were dealing with a relatively drastic consolidation of various veterans organizations, with each bringing its own particular methods of organization and raising and spending money that had to be reconciled. Membership dues, the funding of delegates to various veterans-oriented social and political meetings, and the sponsoring of events pertaining to Memorial Day and other patriotic celebrations were all topics in early debates.

In contrast to the practices of earlier American veterans' organizations, from its earliest days, the VFW made recruitment of new members a central priority. For example, contests were sponsored with prizes given to the posts that showed the greatest enrollment increase in a given period of time (a practice that persists within the VFW to the present day). The council frequently held various social events not only for the benefit of current VFW members but also to attract new enrollees. These events included smokers, bean bakes, Kennywood Park picnics, and trips to meet with VFW posts in other states for social events or patriotic celebrations. Furthermore, a "Publicity Committee" was formed to disseminate VFW-related activities and concerns to the greater public. Recruitment flyers were placed in mills and factories, calling on all who were eligible to join.

The council planned many patriotic activities, both for the benefit of VFW members and for the benefit of the wider public. For example, it arranged locations for "patriotic mass meetings," and "proper" patriotism was extended to the public through the training of members of the Boy Scouts and Boys Brigade as instructors in flag raising, lowering, and folding.

The council also took pride in displaying various war relics during expositions that took place at Pittsburgh's Exposition Hall (a multipurpose building that stood at what is now Pittsburgh's Point State Park) and helped to organize special patriotic celebrations, such as the Liberty Bell's exhibition in Pittsburgh. Perhaps most notably, the council funded and organized major celebrations pertaining to Memorial Day, including parades, memorial services at cemeteries, and military exercises. Camaraderie with other Pittsburgh-area veterans and proper honoring of the dead were at the heart of such activities.

In addition to patriotism-oriented activities, council leaders ensured that Pittsburgh-area VFW posts performed acts that were compassionate in nature. A burial committee addressed cemetery and burial-related issues, and cemetery-specific committees were formed to ensure the proper maintenance and decoration of veterans' graves, as many veterans' families could not afford to do so. Though these acts were certainly charitable in nature, a broader relief committee was formed in order to organize other areas of charitable work that were, from the beginning, central to the founding of the VFW. For example, VFW members reached out to and visited with former comrades or the widows of servicemen who were rumored to be in dire straits and, on the council's behalf, attended to their financial needs. Additionally, local VFW posts made arrangements for seriously ill veterans to be admitted to soldiers' homes for care.

There were some very early indications of the VFW's involvement in politics and public life, though this role would greatly expand and increase in complexity as the 20th century progressed and as the United States' military involvement overseas increased. During these early years (and as would continue to be the case after World War I), a major area of concern was the employment of veterans, as evidenced in the VFW Allegheny County Council's creation of an employment committee. Many veterans returned from war to find their former jobs filled, and some faced employment discrimination. The employment committee sought to address these problems by advocating for veterans who felt that they had been unfairly fired from their jobs and by urging the government to encourage the hiring or rehiring of veterans and to maintain fair hiring practices. In addition, a legal committee addressed political matters, with its chief action at this time being to send resolutions to various government officials, urging them to pass legislation benefiting veterans. By 1916, membership in the council had expanded to include representatives from the Ward #19 and Stuart #86 posts.

WORLD WAR I: 1917–18

The lead-up to the entry of the United States into World War I provided the VFW with many opportunities to strengthen its influence. While the United States was technically a neutral party between 1914 and 1917,

a particular area in which the VFW began to exert considerable influence was that of military preparedness. This dedication to national military preparedness stemmed from the still-vibrant memories of the United States' haphazard and ill-prepared entries into the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars. In 1915, the VFW Allegheny County Council organized a veterans reserve corps when the Pennsylvania National Guard was ordered overseas. Furthermore, Crago, the first commander in chief of the VFW, had argued in 1915 that the United States needed to adequately prepare for war with either Mexico or Germany. Crago argued that the United States needed to increase the size of the Army and form cadres of men to pass along battlefield experience and that better and more extensive equipment was needed for the adequate defense of the country.

At the national encampment of 1916, discussion continued to center around national military preparedness. W.S. Voorsanger of Pittsburgh, perhaps having been inspired by Allegheny County's veterans reserve corps, proposed the creation of a national "adequate veteran reserve," which would enlist "several hundred thousand veterans of the campaigns of the last two decades." Although this suggestion never came to fruition on a national level, many VFW state departments supplied their states with men who performed some of the types of duties envisioned by Voorsanger and others. These included the patrolling of coasts and national boundaries and the investigation of suspected "subversive groups and saboteurs."

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany and officially entered World War I. America's entry into the war galvanized the VFW into action, with more than 60 percent of its members deciding to reenlist. Those still at home channeled their efforts into four main areas: helping to win the war through recruitment activities, fighting for entitlements for the veterans-to-be, advocating for the needs of servicemen's families, and recruiting new VFW members. It can be argued that the VFW's most valuable assistance toward winning the war pertained to recruiting. Even after, however, the VFW did not leave it at that; to keep up the morale of the men that they had helped to recruit, many VFW posts inaugurated a "Vets to Vets" letter program, which sought to initiate correspondence with men from their hometowns. Additionally, *Foreign Service* magazine, which was a forum

for VFW needs, goals, and accomplishments, arrived at training camps in France and included an application for VFW membership. These outreach efforts to World War I servicemen proved to be highly successful. In a letter dated December 30, 1917, Private W.C. George expressed his feelings about the Vets to Vets program. George, who joined New Kensington's Post #92, was reportedly the first man in France to enroll in the VFW during World War I. This excerpt illustrates the pride that many felt with regard to their membership in this new organization:

I received your letter a few days ago and cannot express in words how proud I was to learn that I had been accepted in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, especially the first member of the present war. I felt mighty proud the day I put on my uniform and am still proud of that uniform. But since I have become a member of the Foreign Veterans, my chest has a tendency to stick out a few more inches further than heretofore. Believe me, it is a grand and glorious feeling.

National leaders also became high-profile members of the VFW. On July 26, 1917, former President Theodore Roosevelt joined the organization while visiting Pittsburgh. He was the first of several U.S. presidents to join the VFW.

In May 1918 Woodside, who had resigned his position as national adjutant general of the VFW in order to reenter the Army, urged former President Roosevelt to consider veterans' issues beyond the question of preparedness alone. Woodside called special attention to veterans' care; provisions had to be made for the care of those who would soon be returning physically and mentally traumatized by the war in Europe. This preparedness would contrast with the lack of care following the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars. It was also about this time that the national VFW headquarters relocated from Pittsburgh to New York, N.Y.; the VFW's headquarters eventually moved to its current location in Kansas City, Mo.

Members of the Ladies Auxiliary also made important contributions both during and after the war. They "joined the Red Cross ... focused on helping wounded veterans by wrapping bandages [and] visiting in the hospitals and helping veterans' families." That outreach continued after the war, with the auxiliary continuing to be engaged in work supporting veterans on the mend.

THE INTERWAR PERIOD: 1919-41

Returning veterans of World War I continued the transformation of the VFW from a relatively obscure organization into a well-known order recognized and respected by the public. In 1916, VFW members numbered slightly more than 4,000; by 1920, VFW membership was approximately 20,000, with 500 posts scattered nationwide. Only a year later, membership had tripled to more than 60,000. This evolution and growth was mirrored in the Pittsburgh area. The following Pittsburgh-area posts organized in 1919: Wilksburg Post #234, Edward Donley, Ralston School, Penn Avenue, Manchester Post #258, Butler, and Lock #4. Additionally, the following posts were beginning to organize in November 1919: Pitcairn, McGrail-Coyne, South Side, Braddock, Hazelwood, and Sharpsburg.

While these signs of growth were encouraging, VFW leaders nevertheless felt that further efforts were necessary for ensuring not only the continued survival of the organization but also its growth and vitality. Echoing the military terminology with which many of them were so familiar, local council leaders issued a field order in 1920 to VFW members to capture between 20,000-30,000 men residing in the Pittsburgh region who were eligible for VFW membership but had yet to join. A list of 52 "strong points" to be "captured and organized" was distributed, with places such as Oakland, Oakmont and Verona, Tarentum, Bloomfield, Etna, and Coraopolis, among many others, targeted. Other posts, such as those in Leechburg, Grove City, Sheridan, Vandergrift, Morgantown, New Brighton, and Somerset came into being that year as a result of a burgeoning veteran population.

Another way in which the vitality of the organization was strengthened was through the celebration of Armistice Day, a day of special importance for the many World War I veterans who populated the ranks of the VFW. While Veterans Day was not a national holiday until 1938 (and not even called Veterans Day until 1954), people around the world began to celebrate Armistice Day in 1919. The first documented instance of the council making arrangements for the celebration of Armistice Day was in November 1920, when it worked in conjunction with the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County to organize events celebrating that day. The Armistice

Day parade was the most prominent of those events. It is notable that a moment of silence in memory of the “comrades left on the other side of the water” halted the parade at 11 a.m., for this 11 a.m. moment of silence is now a tradition and is still observed on Veterans Day.

Despite some of its successes, the VFW faced many challenges; its responses to those challenges indicated the commitment of the organization to continue to fight for veterans. Through the formation of a National Service Bureau, which eventually became today’s National Veterans Service, the VFW was instrumental in terms of assisting in the resolution of insurance and death and disability claims; prior to VFW involvement, these benefits had been in disarray; were haphazardly administered; and, in many cases, did not reach veterans at all.

Employment continued to be a particularly troublesome area. As was the case with Spanish-American and Philippine-American War veterans, World War I veterans faced significant employment problems. There were reports of veterans being turned down by the postmaster of the City of Pittsburgh for employment, and the VFW argued once again that the city should give preference to veterans for employment. Veterans who wanted their prewar steel mill and factory jobs back often were out of luck. There was indeed increased cooperation from the Chamber of Commerce, Pennsylvania Railroad, and U.S. Steel in terms of employing veterans, perhaps due to veterans’ employment problems having been brought before the state legislature by the VFW. However, in general, the economic malaise of the early 1920s exacerbated an already difficult situation for veterans. Strikes occurred across the country, and the economic slump caused great frustration for workers and factory owners alike. Much of the blame for these strikes was placed on “homegrown Reds,” as suspected communist conspirators were known. In reaction to this first “Red Scare,” the VFW made anticommunism a core tenet of the organization, with anticommunist activities coming to the fore during the Cold War.

However, the most well-known of the VFW’s employment advocacy efforts was the initiation of the sale of “buddy poppies,” an activity that continues to the present day. The poppy was thought to be the flower of remembrance, with the term “buddy” attached because “buddy” was a common nickname among

World War I comrades. Disabled veterans found employment through the VFW by assembling and selling lapel pin buddy poppies. This benefited disabled veterans everywhere while at the same time reminding Americans of the cost of war. In 1923, a factory in Pittsburgh began assembling buddy poppies. Relatively quickly, pressure grew to produce them in other locales so that disabled veterans around the country would benefit from the work.

Another local effort that specifically sought to aid disabled veterans was advocacy for the completion of the Federal Hospital at Aspinwall. Local VFW officials expressed concerns that existing veterans’ hospitals cut off veterans from the broader community; as a result, they decided that magazines, newspapers, and other items would be sent to hospitalized veterans—an early type of care packages.

On the national level, the late 1920s witnessed the design and realization of a resource that continues to be one of the VFW’s legacies: the VFW National Home for Children. Working closely with the Ladies Auxiliary, which provided much of the funding for additional buildings on the property, the VFW established the home near Eaton Rapids, Mich. Opening in 1925, the home added a hospital, a community center, a nursery, a chapel, and a library over time. Auxiliary funding contributed greatly to these endeavors. While the mission of the home has changed over the years, it remains committed to providing crucial services to veterans, who face some new (and many of the same) issues upon returning home, and their families.

While the VFW and its predecessor veterans’ organizations had advocated for adequate compensation for veterans since the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars, it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that some particularly noteworthy advances occurred in the region. Once again recognizing the power of concerted, rather than divided, action, the VFW and the American Legion worked together to lobby for the payment of a bonus to World War I veterans as “adjusted compensation” for the meager wages received during the conflict. In Pittsburgh, the VFW, the American Legion, and a group called Disabled Veterans worked together to gather signatures for a petition to be presented to the federal government in favor of this adjusted compensation.

On the national level, the “petition in boots”—i.e., the Bonus Parade of 1920 in New York City—and other efforts were a great success for veterans’ activism, given that the World War Adjusted Compensation Act (also called the Bonus Act) was passed in 1924. However, to avoid paying the bonuses in a time of depression and lower revenue, Congress decided that veterans would not receive this compensation until 1945; this caused much outrage, given that it was clear that many World War I veterans were in immediate need. The VFW strongly advocated for immediate cash payment of this compensation. It played an important role in the origins of the 1932 Bonus March, in which more than 40,000 World War I veterans marched on Washington, D.C., to demand early payment of the bonus. The VFW steadfastly continued its advocacy until passage of the Adjusted Compensation Payment Act of 1936, through which the veterans received bonds issued by the U.S. Department of the Treasury that could be redeemed at any time.

The VFW expanded dramatically in the 1930s. From 1929 to 1941, the VFW grew from 70,000 to 214,000 members. By September 1939, 38 posts were represented at the Allegheny County Council meeting; only five posts had been in attendance in 1915. As the VFW increasingly represented veterans from multiple generations, the VFW Allegheny County Council proposed that a historical record be made of veterans’ stories. Additionally, it also began to recognize the importance of immigrants’ membership in the VFW. It established an Americanization committee to aid immigrants with naturalization.

WORLD WAR II

VFW activities in the Pittsburgh region during World War II mostly coincided with those that took place throughout the nation. While the VFW had endorsed neutrality prior to American involvement, the bombing of Pearl Harbor caused the organization to support the war effort and seek to do whatever it could. In Pittsburgh and throughout the nation, the VFW provided civilian auxiliaries to fill vacancies in fire and police units, carried out war bond drives, assisted with physical fitness training, and collected money for the purchase of training airplanes. Additionally, the VFW prepared organizationally and bureaucratically for the great membership boom it expected at the conclusion of the conflict.

The VFW’s preparation for predicted post-World War II membership expansion was certainly warranted; it grew to roughly 1.5 million members (its membership would reach its highest point in 1992 at 2.1 million) and had significant political clout. Along with the American Legion, the VFW used this political strength to push for passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (i.e., the G.I. Bill). The VFW and the American Legion had joined forces to secure passage of this societally transformative piece of social welfare legislation that provided education, housing, and job training to millions of veterans. Initially drafted by University of Pittsburgh alumnus and American Legion official Harry Colmery, the G.I. Bill provided educational opportunities and economic and social stability to returning veterans and their families.

National Commander in Chief Joseph M. Stack had the job of getting the VFW back on a peacetime track. Stack, who was from Pittsburgh, assumed office after the 1945 National Encampment in Chicago, Ill. He was instrumental in terms of engaging the VFW in United Nations activities and in preparing the VFW for its patriotic efforts during the Cold War. Stack and his administration supported the United Nations’ ideals for world peace but also maintained a strict adherence to the traditional devotion to national preparedness for war; consequently, a national security committee was created with the purpose of keeping the VFW updated with regard to goings-on in international politics. Stack prioritized publishing the VFW’s political positions and activities while also taking the VFW’s engagement in public relations to a new level. Stack’s administration set up a press relations department in Washington, D.C. and began publication of *National News*, a VFW monthly magazine in newspaper format.

THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA THROUGH 2001

In the decades following World War II, the VFW deepened its commitment to the many priorities, activities, and goals that had been established since its founding, with just a small amount of debate taking place regarding the organization’s general direction. Certain Pittsburgh-area events provide illustrative examples of the types of activities that the VFW engaged in on a national basis during this era.

The Allegheny County Council of the VFW continued and expanded its patriotic and charitable duties. On Veterans Day in 1958, a bronze plaque was erected on the wall of the Allegheny County Courthouse at the corner of Grant Street and Fifth Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh by the Americanism committee of the council, with funds having been raised by popular subscription from the VFW posts and Ladies Auxiliaries in the county. It engaged in other forms of fundraising, supporting various charities, local schools and hospitals, and other worthy causes.

In general, the VFW departed from its isolationism of the past and supported a more aggressive foreign policy in the United States' "battle" against communism. When public support for the Vietnam War waned, the VFW voiced its belief in continuing the struggle and the need to recognize American soldiers' honorable service.

One of the key advocacy roles taken on by the VFW has been its unrelenting support for adequate medical care for the nation's veterans. After the Vietnam War, it became an outspoken critic of the Veterans Administration's handling of post-traumatic stress disorder and of the physical ailments associated with exposure to Agent Orange. That advocacy has continued in more recent decades; after the conflict in the Persian Gulf in the early 1990s, the VFW supported research into Gulf War syndrome.

2001–PRESENT DAY

The events of September 11, 2001, and the United States' subsequent involvement in the War on Terror have presented new challenges for the VFW in terms of fulfilling the organization's goals of advocating for veterans' rights and providing for veterans and their families' needs.

The challenges facing veterans of the War on Terror mirror the challenges that American veterans have faced since the conclusion of the Spanish American War. This continuity highlights the need for sustained activism by a well-organized and dedicated group. This is a role for which the VFW is well suited, given its leaders' commitment to veterans' causes and the entrenchment of the organization within both American communities and political networks at the local, state, and national levels.

As has been the case for earlier generations of veterans, veterans of the War on Terror have faced great challenges in terms of reentering the workforce upon returning from deployment abroad. Furthermore, the Veterans Administration health care system crisis, in which many veterans have been placed on long waiting lists for medical care, has prevented veterans of all ages from receiving adequate medical attention. More than ever, the VFW is needed as a support system and as a network of societal and political allies for veterans facing what sometimes appear to be overwhelming challenges.

While declining enrollment is certainly a serious issue, the VFW has several important tools at its disposal for reversing this trend. The most basic is through written, word-of-mouth, or door-to-door recruitment efforts, which certainly bring some level of success. Additionally, the VFW can continue to publicly and vocally advocate for veterans' rights at the federal level, remain visible on the American political scene, and assist veterans nationwide with difficult national obstacles (as seen in the ongoing VA health care crisis). These efforts illustrate VFW's importance in bringing veterans' concerns to the attention of the nation as a whole, which in turn inspires veterans who wish to become part of that dialogue to join.

Perhaps the best tool at hand for VFW recruitment efforts is for posts to continue to remain an integral part of American communities by caring for a community's veterans and through performing charitable acts. These activities ensure the continued relevance of individual VFW posts within American communities and build upon the pride that veterans associate with their membership in the VFW. Pittsburgh-area VFW posts indeed continue to fulfill this community-oriented role to a great extent. To cite a few examples, Pittsburgh-area VFW posts continue to organize and participate in Memorial Day and Veterans Day parades, which are the central patriotic events within many local communities. Additionally, Pittsburgh-area VFW posts raise funds for disabled veterans; for example, Post #8430 in North Versailles has spent the past year raising money to purchase a high-tech all-terrain wheelchair for a veteran. Furthermore, members of Pittsburgh-area VFW posts and Ladies Auxiliaries continue to participate in a yearly March for Diabetes from Erie, Pa., to Pittsburgh that raises money for diabetes research.

CONCLUSION

The Pittsburgh region has always been, and continues to be, an important locus for veterans-oriented activities and advocacy. The Pennsylvania Department of the VFW is the largest in the nation, with more than 90,000 combat veterans within its ranks belonging to more than 400 local posts. This dominance in size means that Pittsburgh-area VFW members will continue to be key advocates for veterans' issues and care at the local, state, and national levels.

John A. Biedrzycki Jr., of Coraopolis, Pa., who currently serves as the VFW's senior vice commander in chief, is on course to become the VFW's commander in chief in 2015 and will be the first Pennsylvanian to hold that position since 1971–72. With a Pittsburgher soon to be at the helm of the VFW as a whole, it is all the more certain that the Pittsburgh region will remain integral to the evolution of the organization in the 21st century. ★



Attendees of the Pittsburgh encampment outside the Heinz building, September 1914 (VFW)



The VFW adopted the Cross of Malta as its official insignia at the Pittsburgh encampment, September 1914. (VFW)



U.S. Representative Thomas S. Crago (Waynesburg) was commander in chief of the VFW from 1914 to 1915. (VFW)



Former President Theodore Roosevelt joined the VFW in Pittsburgh in July 1917. (VFW)

Robert Woodside, veteran of four conflicts, graduate of the law school of the University of Pittsburgh, commander of the American Veterans of Foreign Service (1910-13), and commander of the VFW (1920-22) (VFW)





The Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars came into being during the Pittsburgh encampment in 1914. (Ladies Auxiliary)

This was one of seven barracks constructed at the University to house men in a training program for automobile and engine mechanics, 1918. (University of Pittsburgh)



The finished barracks; within six months of construction, more than 2,000 men were receiving training. (University of Pittsburgh)



Division B arrives on June 17, 1918, for training in engine and automobile repair. (University of Pittsburgh)



Trainees of the Student Army Training Corps in front of State Hall (now the site of Chevron Science Center), May 1918 (University of Pittsburgh)



Building a Liberty Truck for the war effort, May 1918 (University of Pittsburgh)



Soldiers in formation on Bigelow Boulevard near Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall & Museum, 1918 (University of Pittsburgh)





Working in the Chassis Laboratory, part of the mechanic trainee program at the University, May 1918 (University of Pittsburgh)



Grinding valves for a Liberty Truck,



Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) Company B, circa 1919 (University of Pittsburgh)



1918 (University of Pittsburgh)



Engine repair on a Liberty Truck, May 1918 (University of Pittsburgh)





School of Pharmacy Company 1 ROTC, circa 1919 (University of Pittsburgh)

★ To The Men In The Service ★



ho have sacrificed their all to bring victory to the Allies' cause—who are now making for themselves and their University a glorious record of unselfish patriotic devotion in the service of their country—and to whom we wish a speedy and safe return—this, the 1919 Owl, is appreciatively dedicated.

The *Owl* yearbook dedicated its 1919 edition "To the Men in the Service." (University of Pittsburgh)



During World War II, the University converted the Cathedral of Learning and other buildings into training facilities for the military. Most of the trainees at the University during the war were in the Air Cadet Training Program. (University of Pittsburgh)



Celebrities endorsed the VFW's Buddy Poppy campaigns, which raised funds and employed disabled veterans. Doris Day was a "Buddy Poppy Girl" in 1950. (VFW)



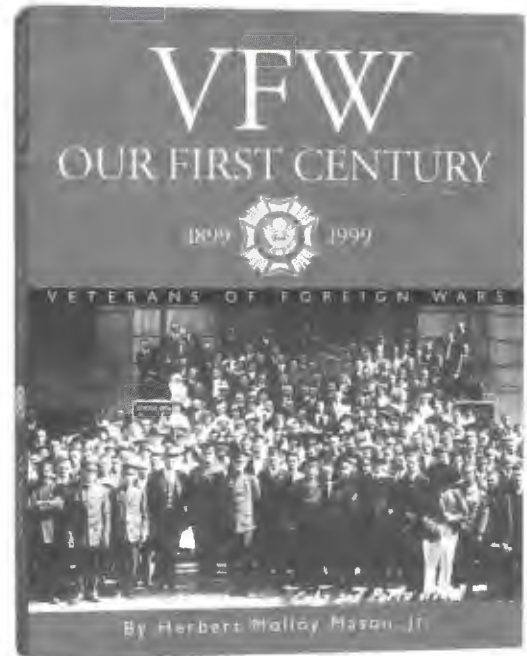
Natalie Wood was a "Buddy Poppy Girl" in 1957. (VFW)



An aerial view of the VFW National Home for Children (VFW)



Cadets march in front of the Cathedral of Learning in 1958 (University of Pittsburgh)



While the VFW officially unified in 1913–14, its founding organizations date back to 1899; this book celebrated the centennial in 1999. (VFW)





Commissioning for the Steel City Navy ROTC Unit, May 2014 (Steel City NROTC)



New student orientation for the Steel City Navy ROTC Unit, 2014 (Steel City NROTC)



Three Rivers Battalion cadre gathers to celebrate “Dining In,” an Army tradition that builds camaraderie, 2013. (Three Rivers Battalion)



Three Rivers Battalion cadets practicing squad level operations in front of Heinz Chapel during Leadership Labs, 2014. (Three Rivers Battalion)



U.S. Air Force ROTC Detachment 730 marching near Heinz Field, 2013 (Det. 730)



U.S. Air Force ROTC Detachment 730 outside the Cathedral of Learning, 2014 (Det. 730)

A large American flag is shown waving on a tall, silver flagpole. The flag is positioned on the left side of the frame, with its stars and stripes clearly visible. The background is a bright blue sky with some white clouds near the bottom. The flagpole has a decorative finial at the top.

CONSTITUTIONAL AIMS OF THE VFW

The objects of this organization are fraternal, patriotic, historical and educational; to preserve and strengthen comradeship among its members; to assist worthy comrades; to perpetuate the memory and history of our dead, and to assist their widows and orphans; to maintain true allegiance to the government of the United States of America, and fidelity to its constitution and laws; to foster true patriotism; to maintain and extend institutions of American freedom; and to preserve and defend the United States from all her enemies, whomsoever.



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